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ABSTRACT

Black Americans' use of and belief in the credibility of the mass media is no less extensive than that of the general population. In fact, television and radio use by blacks exceeds that of whites and research shows the broadcast media to be particularly important sources of information for blacks on consumer and political affairs. But many writers feel that blacks, often either ignored altogether or portrayed negatively, are damaged by their treatment in the media and as viewers, readers, and listeners may learn negative self-concepts. They see this as being particularly true for black children--the nonpresentation of blacks, many say, is destructive to black children's self-concept because it denies the importance of their existence. Research on black children reveals that they are especially susceptible to the effects of television: they watch more of it, are more likely to believe in the "reality" of television, and are more likely than other children to say that they identify with and imitate television characters. Television has the potential to play a major role in their socialization. But presently the media must be criticized for their failure to affect the lives of blacks by continuously reporting on issues germane to the survival of blacks. A list of 45 citations referenced in the text of the article is attached, along with a bibliography of 122 items entitled "Blacks and the Mass Media: A Selected Bibliography," by Betty M. Culpepper. (KH)

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MASS MEDIA EFFECTS AND BLACK AMERICANS

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Mass Media Effects and Black Americans

by
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Central to any discussion of the effects of the mass media is the acknowledgement of the ubiquity of the mass media in American society. Statistics substantiate the media's pervasive presence; for example, Americans currently possess more than four radios per household, and circulation of daily newspapers exceed one per household. Moreover, almost all homes have one or more television sets, with about 20 percent of them linked with cable (*Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1983; Roberts, 1974).

Americans make use of the media they have acquired. Numerous studies indicate that adults report that use of the mass media accounts for over 50 percent of their leisure time, and children profess to watch television in excess of four hours per day (Comstock et al., 1978; Lee & Browne, 1981; Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982; Roberts, 1974). Indeed, it has been estimated that by the time the average child reaches adulthood, he or she will have spent more time watching television than in any other single activity except sleep (Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973).

Americans also place a great deal of credibility in the media, especially television, as news sources. Two-thirds of the U.S. public rely on television as its source of news, and almost half ranks television as the most believable news source (Broadcasting Yearbook, 1983).

Black Americans' use of and credibility in the media are no less extensive than that of the general population. In fact, their use of radio and television exceeds that of whites (Bogart, 1972). In addition, Blacks rely on television, in particular, for various kinds of information, including consumer information and political news and information (Block, 1976; Stroman & Becker, 1978). Moreover, some Blacks report viewing television to obtain information on other Blacks and the Black community (Shosteck, 1969).

All of the foregoing material underscores the presence and points to the potential influence of the mass media. What have research and theory shown the general effects of the media to be? The following section briefly elucidates a number of dimensions associated with media effects.

The Nature of Effects

Mass communication researchers have devoted an inordinate amount of attention to the effects of the mass media.[1] This is understandable since intuitively it appears obvious that information is communicated with the intent of causing some effect, of shaping the attitudes, opinions, or behavior of others (Roberts, 1974). Thus, the study of communication effects has historically been centered around the stimulus response model of communication. That is, researchers sought evidence of a given message producing a specific response.

With the publication of several works which advanced the notion that the media have little or no effect (Berelson, Lazarfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Klapper, 1960; Lazarfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) came the abandonment of the simple stimulus-response framework. Replacing the assumption of powerful media effects was a broader view of the effects of the media. Researchers and theorists alike have begun to subscribe to the notion that the media's ability to make us aware of events and persons beyond our immediate experience or to structure our conception of "reality" may be one of the media's most simple yet potent effects. As Roberts (1974, p. 378) observes: "Although most of us will never set foot on the moon, participate in a Middle Eastern war, or experience a heart transplant, because of the information the mass media have made available, each of these events probably contributes to aspects of our image of the environment to which we respond."

The ability of the media to focus public attention on events and individuals has far-reaching consequences; agenda-setting research illustrates some of these consequences. Research using the agenda-setting framework asserts a direct causal relationship between the content of the media agenda and subsequent public perception of what the important issues of the day are. As a result of this relationship, events and individuals gain in public significance as they gain public attention (Benton & Frazier, 1976; Funkhouser, 1973; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Shaw & McCombs, 1977). Thus, the media, through their effect on public awareness, are able to affect cognitive change among individuals.

In addition to having cognitive effects, the media may have effects on the behaviors and attitudes of media consumers. Imitative performance by a viewer of a behavior seen on television is taken as evidence of media effects. The development, on the part of readers or viewers, of attitudes or expectations from something obtained from the print or broadcast media is also viewed as evidence of the effects of the media.

Identification is another possible effect of the media. This refers to a media user's involvement, through a psychological relationship, with a character appearing in a media presentation (Weiss, 1969). The vicarious participation of the media user in the feelings and behavior of the character is viewed as evidence of the effects of the media.

Media effects can be discerned along numerous other dimensions. These dimensions run the gamut from learning a new fact or behavior from a newspaper article, for example, to emotional arousal while viewing a television program. Also, the effects of mass-mediated information may be long-term or short-term, and may occur on a micro as well as a macro level.

In essence, when one speaks of the effects of the media, he or she alludes to a broad range of consequences that may occur as the result of exposure to a given piece of communication. These consequences range from increased awareness or knowledge to performance of an exhibited behavior to development of attitudes and expectations.

While noting that the foregoing description of media effects is not exhaustive, it should also be pointed out that the effects of the media are not monolithic. There are individual differences in media effects. A variety of demographic and sociopsychological variables, e.g., needs, values, race, age, and so forth, have been found to intervene between a media message and an individual's response to this message. (Dates, 1980; Lee & Browne, 1981; Shaw & McCombs, 1977; Weiss, 1969). Moreover, media audiences choose the messages they will attend to and interpret these messages within their personal frameworks of beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. Finally, it must be noted that since the media do not operate in a vacuum, a given media message is seldom, if ever, the sole cause of an effect. With these caveats in mind, we now turn to an examination of the effects of the media on Blacks.

Media Effects on Blacks

Before considering the effects of the media on Blacks, it may be instructive to briefly consider the manner in which Blacks have been portrayed in the media. Traditionally, the media have excluded Blacks from media presentations (Lambert, 1965; O'Kelly & Bloomquist, 1976; Seggar & Wheeler, 1973; Shuey, King, & Griffith, 1953; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977). When Blacks are featured in the media, they are generally cast in subordinate, servile and comedic roles and other such narrow roles that show nothing of the diversity of Black life and culture. The Reverend Jesse Jackson recently referred to this in explaining his failure to attract white support in his bid to capture the Democratic presidential nomination. He noted that this failure is partially due to "the five deadly ways" in which the media portray Blacks: "as less intelligent, less hardworking, less universal, less patriotic, and more violent than we are" (Sherwood, 1984). In short, Black portrayals in the media are unflattering, misleading, and designed in such a manner as to reinforce stereotypes commonly associated with Blacks.

What impact do the media have on Black viewers, listeners, and readers? Is the portrayal of Blacks identified above harmful to Blacks? Many writers think so and a number of them have expressed the opinion that the media, particularly television, may have deleterious effects on Blacks. As an example, Clark (1971) argues that television damages Black self-concept by its nonrecognition of Blacks. Similarly, Tan & Tan (1979) reasoned that since Blacks are often portrayed negatively or are non-existent in television entertainment programming, Blacks viewing such programming may learn negative self-concepts.

A great deal of the concern expressed about the portrayals of Blacks and their families is related to the perceived negative impact that television has on Black children. Rosser (1978), for example, maintains that television sometimes hinders Black parents' efforts to teach pride and self-respect to their childern by its glamorization of negative images. Powell (1982) provides a similar view in her assertion that the nonpresentation of Blacks on television is particularly destructive to Black children's self-concept because it denies the importance of their existence.

In a discussion of the dysfunctional personal attitudes that Black children may acquire from television, Janis (1980) elaborated on how television may have a negative influence on Black youngsters' self-concepts. He maintains that "because Blacks are often shown in menial occupational roles, Black youths may acquire the impression that professional and leadership roles are out of the question for them."

In sum, then, theorists and other writers are emphatic in their contention that the media have adverse effects on Blacks. Critical commentary, however, is in greater abundance than "hard data." What has scientific research shown the effects of the media to be on Blacks?

The bulk of research on media effects and Blacks, like the critical commentary, focuses on Black children. This is understandable since the media are more likely to have effects on children than adults. Clearly, childhood is a period during which individuals are especially dependent on others for information and thus they are particularly susceptible to the influence of mass-mediated information that assists in their cognitive and affective development (Bandura, 1969). Moreover, as Comer (1982) explains, television is especially powerful for children because early visual images and attitudes have tremendously more impact than later images and attempts to change attitudes.

Black children are indeed susceptible to the effects of the media, especially television. Not only do Black children report watching television more, they are also more likely to believe in the reality of television (Dates, 1980; Donohue & Donohue, 1977; Greenberg & Atkin, 1978). Moreover, Black children are more likely than other children to say that they identify with and imitate television characters (Dates, 1980; Nicholas, McCarter, & Heckel, 1971a, 1971b; Stroman, 1983).

The implications of the findings reported above are related to a consistently documented effect of the media: Black children do learn from television (Dates, 1980; Gerson, 1966; Greenberg & Atkin, 1978; Greenberg & Dominick, 1969; O'Bryant & Corder-Bolz, 1978). Gerson (1966), for example, reports that Black adolescents use the media to learn how to behave with members of the opposite sex. Similarly, Greenberg & Atkin's (1978) study indicates that Black children rely on television to learn how different people act in different situations, as well as to find out about jobs, decision-making, and problem-solving. Previous research also suggests that Black children learn behaviors from televised models (Nicholas, McCarter, & Hechel, 1971a, 1971b; Thelen, 1971; Thelen & Soltz, 1969). The suggestion here is that since Black children use the media for such diverse learning, the media certainly have the potential to play a major role in the socialization of Black children.

The media also appear to have effects on learning in Black adults. There is evidence that Black adults learn from television (Leckenby & Surlin, 1976); in particular, Blacks report using the political content of newspapers to learn about candidates for political office and to gain assistance in voting (Stroman & Becker, 1978). Blacks also report learning about Black psychology and the strengths of the Black family from the television mini-series "Roots" (Howard, Rothbart, & Sloan, 1978).

"Roots" also had other media effects on Blacks. Seemingly it had a pronounced, albeit short-term, impact on Black attitudes and perceptions, as well as interpersonal communication, knowledge, and emotions among Blacks. Reportedly "Roots" aroused

a number of emotions in Blacks, including sadness, anger, triumph, and tears (Howard, Rothbart, & Sloan, 1978).

One important, though indirect, effect that the media have had on the lives of Black Americans is related to the role the media played in escalating the civil rights movement into an issue of public concern. Although a number of conditions gave rise to the movement, the media were very instrumental in pushing civil rights onto the public's agenda of salient issues. This served to ensure that consideration was given to issues, events, and personalities connected with the movement and Black life and culture.

Conversely, the media must be criticized for its failure to continue to affect the lives of Blacks by continuously reporting on issues germane to the survival of Blacks. In describing what the media do not tell us, Comer (1982) makes the point that "television has not explained that the policies of this society created a disproportionate number of overwhelmed Blacks, and that the Blacks we see in comedic roles on television are really a product of inadequate, immoral and inappropriate social policy—policy beyond the control of Blacks." Had the media accepted the opportunity to explain such (or if they would do so now), they would have a significant impact on Blacks. For, in doing so, they would provide the basis for a detailed understanding of the causes of Black-white differences and they would help to shatter some of the stereotypes and myths associated with being Black in America.

These, then, are some of the effects that the media have on Blacks. As can be observed, the critical conjecture outweighs the empirical evidence, and few of the assertions discussed earlier have been backed by solid empirical evidence. Yet, the findings of previous research do suggest that the media have significant cognitive and psychological effects on Blacks, particularly Black children.

In concluding, it is worth noting that there has been little attempt to fully understand the special effects that the media have on Blacks. It is equally clear that an enormous amount of research is needed to fill in the void in our knowledge in this very important area. Considering the potential for research to contribute to media policies and practices, it seems imperative that rigorous research on the effects of the media on Blacks should be instituted. Of particular importance is research which examines the effects that the introduction of new communications technologies, e.g., cable television, has on Blacks.

NOTE

1. For comprehensive reviews of the effects of the media, see Klapper, 960; Maccoby, 1964; Schramm & Roberts, 1974; Weiss, 1969).

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